# Harrison Birtwistle

# Chamber Music

Lisa Batiashvili
Adrian Brendel
Till Fellner
Amy Freston
Roderick Williams

ECM NEW SERIES

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## Chamber Music

Lisa Batiashvili violin
Adrian Brendel violoncello
Till Fellner piano
Amy Freston soprano
Roderick Williams baritone

## Harrison Birtwistle (*1934)

1–3 **Three Settings of Lorine Niedecker**

for soprano and violoncello

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| I | **Always north of him** | 1 : 19 |
| II | **I was the solitary plover** | 1 : 42 |
| III | **As I shook dust from my father's door** | 1 : 17 |

4 **Trio** 15 : 53

for violin, violoncello and piano

5–9 **Bogenstrich – Meditations on a poem of Rilke**

for baritone, violoncello and piano

| | |
|---|---|
| **Liebes-Lied 1** | 6 : 03 |
| **Lied ohne Worte** | 6 : 16 |
| **Variationen** | 6 : 22 |
| **Wie eine Fuge** | 6 : 19 |
| **Liebes-Lied 2** | 6 : 26 |

10–18 **Nine Settings of Lorine Niedecker**

for soprano and violoncello

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| I | **There’s a better shine** | 1 : 01 |
| II | **My friend tree** | 0 : 48 |
| III | **Along the river** | 1 : 34 |
| IV | **Hear where her snowgrave is** | 1 : 01 |
| V | **How the white gulls** | 2 : 02 |
| VI | **My life** | 2 : 13 |
| VII | **Paul** | 1 : 43 |
| VIII | **O late fall** | 1 : 09 |
| IX | **Sleep’s dream** | 1 : 55 |

# Harrison Birtwistle: Chamber Music

## Introduction

In the living room of his home in rural Wiltshire, Sir Harrison Birtwistle takes an egg-shaped pebble and gently projects it onto a glass tabletop. No sooner released, than the pebble begins to rock rhythmically to and from, its sounds amplified by the glass. But because it is slightly irregular in shape, it also swerves from side to side at a different rate, creating a cross-pulsation. As its energy runs down, these cross-pulsations come and go, shifting unpredictably in rate and relationship until they resolve into a barely perceptible juddering as the pebble comes to rest. No doubt a physicist could explain this in terms of the laws of mass, weight, curvature and kinetic energy; no doubt a clever craftsman could convert such findings into an amusing novelty. Yet Birtwistle's pebble is no designer toy; it is one of a collection of sea-worn stones gathered at random on the East Anglian coast, whose particular properties he only discovered later.

And the uncanny part of it is how closely the sounds and motions of the pebble resemble the workings of his own music. The most obvious analogy would be with a number of pieces based upon interacting 'mechanisms' – the clockwork cross-rhythms of his tape-collage *Chronometer* (1972), for instance. But abstracted into a set of metronomic relationships, the pebble's various cross-pulsations would also constitute something like the 'pulse labyrinth' of inter-related tempi upon which Birtwistle has elaborated such ensemble piece as *Silbury Air* (1976). Conversely, if one were to record, vastly slow down and amplify the sounds of the pebble, one would actually hear a ponderous grinding of cross-tempi, resembling the stratified textures of his monumental *Earth Dances* (1989).

Implicit in all these scores is a cyclical, rather than goal-directed sense of time – as indeed there is in the operations of the pebble itself, which, however forcefully projected onto a flat surface, will always run down in much the same way according to its inherent laws. Birtwistle has often likened the unfolding of his pieces to taking a series of different routes across the same landscape or finding different ways round a maze. This cleaving to a music of detailed variation within more or less fixed boundaries he first seems to have recognized in himself when he encountered the music of Messiaen. But where Messiaen's closed musical world is essentially a celebration of God's creation, Birtwistle's musical vision seems more pagan and pessimistic in implication: a world in which human action is continually constrained by laws of nature on the one hand, and the arbitrary operations of chance, on the other. Birtwistle's response to this perceived predicament has been to approach composition as a kind of grim game in which, by seeming to submit both to nature in the form of deterministic procedures, and to chance, through the interposing of arbitrary elements, such as random number schemes, he is able to set up contexts of disruption – 'a logic that's been fractured,' as he has put it – from which spontaneous and personal inventions may yet be wrested. Somewhere in the background of this bleak aesthetic, one senses the doggedness of his North-country origins. Brought up on a smallholding in Lancashire, he rather hid his compositional efforts from his more sophisticated companions, Alexander Goehr and Peter Maxwell Davies, at the old Royal Manchester College of Music in the early 1950s. And when he did begin to find his way, it was by simply turning his back on most of the skills that composers were traditionally supposed to acquire and concentrating on the few fundamental elements – pulse, ostinato, monody, refrain-and-chorus structure – that he knew he could handle. Apart from the formalistic element in Machaut, Bach and Stravinsky, or aspects of Satie, Varèse and Messiaen at variance with European tradition, he admitted few influences. Yet already in *Tragoedia* (1965), he achieved a break-

through masterpiece of striking novelty that defined the scope of his future output: the juxtapositions of violence and lyricism, the formalistic theatricality, the long lines and block contrasts of his structural continuities.

These underlying procedures have not really changed in his more recent music. What has to some extent, is its surface, as he has come freshly to the music of composers such as – Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Wagner of whom he took little account in earlier years. Not that his recent music makes any *stylistic* allusions to these composers. But there have been developments in his more flexible handing of tempi, more sensitive gauging of instrumental balance and colour, and, not least, in his greater willingness to tackle more traditional genres in own inimitable way.

## Trio

Although Birtwistle's earliest published work *Refrains and Choruses* (1957) was for wind quintet, he typically preferred to choose a different line-up of performers for each subsequent piece, presumably believing that standard ensembles might raise standard expectations in his listeners. Not till the 1990s did he really begin to engage with the string quartet – a genre that, at least, has a modernist tradition to draw from. Yet there was still some surprise when he brought out his recent Trio for violin, cello and piano, since, partly because of a balance problem for the two strings against the power of the modern grand piano (a problem that was already apparent in Brahms), there have been few outstanding 20th century piano trios. One of the most striking aspects of Birtwistle's approach to this once-standard genre is that, in finding his own form and content for it, he has simultaneously resolved the balance problem.

This he achieves partly by alternation between piano and strings, partly by treating the strings as a duet while the piano simultaneously pursues quite distinct figuration of its own. Only in a climactic passage towards the end of

the Trio's 16-minute single-movement form do the instruments briefly interlock as violin and piano left hand unfold long lines against rapid figures for cello and piano right hand. The work begins with a series of piano gestures and string responses, distantly analogous, perhaps, to the formal introduction of a classical suite or symphony. Then it settles into a long sequence of paragraphs in which the strings elaborate two-part inventions of varying character while the piano accompanies with wave-like undulations or more mechanistic patterns. After the climax, the music breaks apart into gestures and responses reminiscent of the opening, with the strings finally expiring against one of Birtwistle's machine ostinati in the piano – a 'dying fall' he underlines by quoting at the end of his score, Verlaine's line: *'Les sanglots longs des violons de l'automne'.* The Trio was commissioned by Emmanuel Roman and premiered in Celle in April 2011.

Settings of Lorine Niedecker

Birtwistle has sometimes suggested that, to achieve true originality, an artist needs to push procedures to extremes. So it is hardly surprising that he has long admired the unprecedented compression of structure and feeling in the music of Webern. Indeed, between his more monumental scores, Birtwistle has composed a number of pieces of comparably rarefied texture. Usually these have been exiguously lyrical vocal settings with ensemble – of Sappho, Japanese poetry, Rilke, Robbe-Grillet. However, for *Songs by Myself* (1984) and *Words Overheard* (1985) he wrote his own cryptically intimate verses. So it is not surprising he would respond to the concise and personal poems of Lorine Niedecker (1903–1970). Now acknowledged as one of the most striking American modernists of her generation, Niedecker lived most of her life in humdrum circumstances in Wisconsin. But, from the early 1930s, she was promoted by the influential New York poet Louis Zukofsky, addressing some of her most

memorable verses to his young son – the future violin virtuoso and conductor Paul Zukofsky.

Birtwistle composed his first three Niedecker settings for soprano and cello in 1998 as his contribution to a *Festschrift* celebrating the 90th birthday of Elliott Carter in the quarterly review *Tempo*. Six more settings were added in 2000, commissioned by the Nash Ensemble. 'I think of this sequence of vocal miniatures, starting with my offering for Carter, as being like a bunch of flowers,' Birtwistle has written and he has recently added yet three more songs to the bunch. On the face of it, these miniature settings – nine of them comprising a page or less of notation each – could hardly seem sparer in texture and expression. The vocal line is either spasmodically syllabic, as in settings I, IV, VI and IX, or, if more sustained, tends to pivot around a handful of pitches, as in II, V, VII and XII; setting VIII is unique in opening with an eight-pitch melisma on the word 'O'. The cello part is usually drawn from a single, sometimes imagistic figure, as in the sighing quarter-tones of IV suggesting 'mourning doves', the wave-like rise and fall of double stops in VII or the hesitant rocking heartbeats of IX; setting VI, 'My life by water', is exceptional in alternating a variety of cello figures and sounds. In settings I, II and X, voice and cello are not even required to co-ordinate exactly. Yet these concentrated songs demand the utmost of their performers in precision, expression and timing. As in Webern's settings, the few words and notes on the page can seem to imply whole worlds of thought and feeling.

Bogenstrich

In 2006, Birtwistle was commissioned by the Ruhr Piano Festival to compose a short piece in honour of Alfred Brendel's 75th birthday, to be played by his cellist son Adrian Brendel and the pianist Till Fellner. Birtwistle responded with *Lied ohne Worte.* The following year, he wrote his *Variationen* based on a

dark chord sequence from *Lied ohne Worte*, to a commission from Adrian Brendel himself. Whether or not Birtwistle had associated this material with Rilke's celebrated lyric *Liebes-Lied* from the start, he then decided to set the poem for baritone and piano as a prelude to, and reworking some of the material from, *Lied ohne Worte*. He also complemented the two cello and piano movements with a faster third entitled *Wie eine Fuge* and rounded off the sequence with a second setting Of *Liebes-Lied,* again echoing *Lied ohne Worte,* this time for baritone and cello. The result, premiered complete in 2009, is a true cycle, in which musical ideas recur in different contexts with the poetic intimacy almost of a latter day Schumann.

Indeed, except for its actual pitches, the gentle opening of *Liebes-Lied 1* could almost be *by* Schumann. Rilke's poem tells of the difficulty of separating his soul from that of his beloved, and the piano accompaniment to Birtwistle's tender first setting largely comprises a heterophonic twisting of two lines – just as the cello accompaniment to his second setting counterpoints the instrument's open strings with second line. Of the intervening pieces*, Lied ohne Worte* has a darker colouration with some fierce gestures at its centre, while *Variationen* is a concise, sometimes abrupt sequence of contrasting sections. By contrast, *Wie eine Fuge,* counterpoints three, and later, four unrelated lines – which enter sequentially like a fugue – against an unchanging fast metre, throwing up some dizzying cross-rhythms.

Birtwistle took the overall title *Bogenstrich* for his cycle from Rilke's image of a bow stroke, drawing a single voice from two strings. And he inscribed the work to his wife Sheila quoting Rilke's question: 'On what instrument are we strung? / And which violinist holds us in his hands?' – a dedication that her recent death has only rendered the more poignant.

Bayan Northcott

# Love Song

How shall I hold my soul, so
It does not touch yours? How shall I
lift it over you stretching to other things?
Ah, gladly would I hide it
with something lost in darkness
at an unknown quiet place
abating while your depths vibrate.
Yet all that touches us, you and me,
conjoins us like a stroke of a bow,
which draws but one voice from two strings.
Upon which instrument are we strung?
And who is the fiddler who holds us in his hand?
Oh sweet song.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Translated by Jochen Voigt

# Liebes-Lied

Wie soll ich meine Seele halten, daß
sie nicht an deine rührt? Wie soll ich sie
hinheben über dich zu andern Dingen?
Ach gerne möcht ich sie bei irgendwas
Verlorenem im Dunkel unterbringen
an einer fremden stillen Stelle, die
nicht weiterschwingt, wenn deine Tiefen schwingen.
Doch alles, was uns anrührt, dich und mich,
nimmt uns zusammen wie ein Bogenstrich,
der aus zwei Saiten eine Stimme zieht.
Auf welches Instrument sind wir gespannt?
Und welcher Geiger hat uns in der Hand?
O süßes Lied.

Rainer Maria Rilke

# Three Seetings of Lorine Niedecker

## I

Always north of him
I see

he's close
to orange, flower

rosate bird
soft air

the state
I'm in.

## II

I was the solitary plover
a pencil
                for a wing bone
From the secret notes
I must tilt
upon the pressure
execute and adjust
                In us sea-air rhythm
"We live by the urgent wave
of the verse"

## III

As I shook dust
from my father's door
I saw young Aeneas
on the shore

mulling the past
– a large town
and a wartime island –
a pleasure now.

I'll wait, he said,
till a star shows
that's gone
when it snows.

# Nine Settings of Lorine Niedecker

## I

There's a better shine
on the pendulum
than is on my hair
and many times

..  ..

I've seen it there.

## II

My friend tree
I sawed you down
but I [must] attend
an older friend
the sun

## III

Along the river
        wild sunflowers
over my head
        the dead
who gave me life
        give me this
our relative the air
        floods
our rich friend
    silt

IV

Hear
where her snow-grave is
the You
ah you
of mourning doves

V

How white the gulls
in grey weather
Soon April
the little
yellows

VI

My life
by water –
Hear

Spring's
first frog
or board

out on the cold
ground
giving

Muskrats
gnawing
doors

to wild green
arts and letters
Rabbits

raided
my lettuce
One boat

two –
pointed toward
my shore

of the soft
and serious
Water

VII

Paul
when the leaves
fall

from their stems
that lie thick
on the walk

in the light
of the full note
the moon

playing
to leaves
when they leave

the little
thin things
Paul

VIII

O late fall
marsh –
I
raped by the dry
weed stalk

IX

Sleep's dream
the nerve-flash in the blood

The sense
of what's seen

'I took cold
on my nerves' – my mother

tall, tormented
darkinfested

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